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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 003627

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SUBJECT: TFLE01: SYRIA DAILY SITREP 08 FOR MONDAY, JULY 24, 2006

REF: PRM LEBANON HUMANITARIAN UPDATE - JULY 23

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (S) Summary: Up to 250,000 people have entered Syria from Lebanon since the start of the Israel-Hizballah conflict, with up to 90,000 needing "immediate assistance," according to contacts. Displaced Lebanese are settling throughout the country, with many seeking aid from the government, Syrian Arab Red Crescent, families, private welfare societies and religious centers. The flood of Lebanese arrivals has allowed normal Syrians to warm toward their Lebanese neighbors, after the chilly relations--and hostile street attitudes--that followed the assassination of Lebanon's former PM and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country. Syria's FM met July 23 with a German envoy about the conflict, and Syria's Information Minister met recently in Madrid with the Spanish FM, according to media reports. Sources indicate that Syrian government departments--as well as the military--are on high alert, manning 24-hour watchstands, and making contingency planning for a crisis here. About 180 walk-ins requested American Citizen Services (ACS) on Sunday, July 23, down slightly from 200 requests on July 19 and 20 from the previous week. The volume of ACS-related phone calls dropped significantly. Damascus International Airport is operating at 150 percent above the pre-crisis capacity, according to media reports. End Summary.

POLITICAL/MILITARY

¶2. (S) The following are political/military updates:

-- Embassy contacts were unable to pin an exact figure on the number of people who have entered Syria from Lebanon since the start of the Israeli-Hizballah conflict (some are quoting up to 250,000), but sources cited an approximate 90,000 Lebanese and others who needed "immediate assistance" (Ref-update). Displaced Lebanese are settling throughout the country, including in Damascus, in cities along the Syria-Lebanon border such as Idlib, Tartous, Hama and Homs, as well as in the northeastern city of Hassake, with many seeking aid from the government, Syrian Arab Red Crescent, families, private welfare societies and religious centers, according to contacts. Cars bearing Lebanese license plates, recently rare on Syrian roads, are now a common sight. Well-to-do Lebanese have taken over the leases of many vacationing Saudis who fled the Syrian tourist area of Zabadani, according to a Syrian family from the area. (Comment: The flood of Lebanese arrivals has allowed normal Syrians to warm toward their Lebanese neighbors, after the

chilly relations--and hostile street attitudes--that followed the assassination of Lebanon's former PM, the withdrawal of Syrian troops, and the exodus of tens of thousands of Syrian laborers from the country.)

-- The SARG will press for a cease-fire to end fighting between Israel and Hizballah, but only as part of a larger Middle East peace initiative, according to Syrian Information Minister Mohsen Bilal in an interview with the Spanish daily newspaper, ABC. Bilal gave the interview in Madrid after holding talks with the Spanish FM Miguel Moratinos, according to the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) which gave no indication of when the meeting occurred.

-- Syria's Ambassador to Washington Imad Mustapha told Al-Jazeera television in a recent interview that the only diplomacy the U.S. Administration was conducting in the Middle East was providing Israel with smart bombs. He described comments by U.S. Secretary of State about a new Middle East as "dreams, which resemble the U.S. dreams in Iraq."

-- Syria's FM Walid al-Mu'allim met July 23 with a visiting German envoy, discussing the Syrian vision of resolving the crisis in Lebanon, according to the regional al-Hayat newspaper. The Syrian plan includes a cease-fire, a prisoners' swap, and a comprehensive settlement to the Middle East conflict, according to the al-Hayat report.

-- Syrian President Bashar al-Asad recently told a delegation of Arab and Islamic party leaders that opening the Golan issue would only serve Israeli interests, according to the weekly newspaper, Al-Moharer Al-Arabi. Asad was quoted by

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the newspaper as saying that "the Syrian leadership thinks that liberating the Golan can be launched from Sheba'a Farms, as it is part of the Golan geography and a safe area for the resistance." Responding to a question from one of the leaders, Asad said it would be possible to intervene to ease Israeli pressure on Lebanon, only if Syria is given the green light to return to Lebanon, according to regional media.

-- The DAO reports no significant Syrian military movement observed in the past 24 hours. Sources indicate that Syrian government departments -- as well as the military -- are on high alert, manning 24-hour watchstands, and making contingency planning for a crisis here. In contrast, there was no observed increase in external security around Syrian government buildings in Damascus.

-- Sources report that small groups of pro-Hizballah supporters drove and/or walked through parts of Damascus last night. No incidents were reported and the U.S. Embassy was not threatened.

CONSULAR

13. (U) The following are consular updates:

-- About 180 walk-ins requested American Citizen Services (ACS) on Sunday, July 23, down slightly from 200 requests on July 19 and 20 from the previous week. The volume of ACS-related phone calls dropped significantly.

-- Separately, more than 40 American citizens were arriving in Syria or were seeking to enter the country over the past few days, according to phone calls to the section.

ECONOMIC

14. (C) The following are economic updates:

-- Damascus International Airport is operating at 150 percent above the pre-crisis capacity, increasing from 40 to 100 the number of incoming and outgoing flights daily, according to

airport Director Ahmad Hamada in an article on Syria's Champress website. He added that Lebanon's Middle East Airlines has begun operating up to four daily flights out of Damascus, according to Champress.

-- Despite private sector contributions on behalf of displaced Lebanese reported in previous sitreps, the government is starting to interfere with companies' ability to respond to the crisis by trying to take more direct control of relief efforts, according to contacts. The President of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Abdul Rahman Attar, who is also a prominent Sunni businessman, says this doesn't bode well for the ability of Syria or its government to respond effectively to what he thinks will be a growing humanitarian crisis, particularly when the beginning of the academic year in early September requires displaced Lebanese to vacate improvised housing in Syrian schools. Attar noted that there was no overarching SARG entity to coordinate SARG ministers--including for Red Crescent Affairs, Religious Trusts, and Social Affairs and Labor--who are dealing with the influx of displaced Lebanese, and all are struggling for primacy. The USG should support relief efforts in Syria to address negative public reaction in the region to the Israel-Hizballah conflict, Attar said.

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